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## THE FUTURE HAS ALREADY HAPPENED

NONPOLITICS ACCELERATION, AUTOMATION, GRUNDEINKOMMEN, NO FUTURE, NON-TECHNICS

In November 2015, Verso Books sent a copy of *Inventing the Future* by Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams to every member of the UK's Labour Shadow Cabinet. The shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, at least, appeared to have read it: a few days later, he unveiled a very future-oriented economic policy. "It's socialism," he said, "but socialism with an iPad." Not long afterwards, the Guardian writer Zoe Williams directly referenced the book in a column titled "The future's at stake: the left must show it could create an iPad." Which is on the face of it strange, because the iPad doesn't belong to the future; it's something that already exists, and has done so since 2010. How is it that "inventing the future" has come to be effectively synonymous with "inventing the iPad?"

As soon as it's crystallized, the future is already over. This thought is not new; few things are. In *High Rise*, thirty-five years before the iPad, J.G. Ballard – the only writer capable of really understanding the 21st century – saw the tide of progress carrying us into a "landscape beyond technology." Surrounded by broken washing machines and clogged-up air vents, the productive apparatuses of society transformed into a set of symbols, his hero Robert Laing senses a "future that had already taken place, and was now exhausted." And Ballard has strange company here. For Srnicek and Williams, the same period in which he was writing, the 1970s, also marks the point where their own future died.

It was in the 70s that futurity was captured by the political right; under neoliberalism it's the right that radically reshapes the world according to its own vision, while the left has resigned itself to a series of desperate rearguard actions, trying to defend the last fragments of the welfare state, clinging to a socialist past instead of trying to imagine a socialist future. To briefly summarize the book: Srnicek and Williams argue that the left has been paralyzed by what they call "folk politics": a cluster of practices characterized by localism, horizontalism, prefiguration, direct action, and direct experience. All these forms privilege immediate suffering and immediate struggles – folk politics isn't getting us anywhere, they argue; it fights small battles on fractured terrains, without any master plan for a transformed society, and even there it loses. We're trapped in nostalgia for a lost era of Maoist revolution or social-democratic comfort, and all the while the world is slipping into a digitized apocalypse. To halt the coming catastrophe, the left needs to offer an enticing vision of the future, and Srnicek and Williams have such a vision. We should demand full automation of production, a reduction or elimination of the working week, a universal basic income, and "the diminishment of the work ethic." We should demand a future in which the pointless tedium of waged labor is eliminated entirely,

and humanity is free to concentrate on something more important. There'll be iPads.

All these things, they assure us, are actually achievable, and I don't doubt them. We are all still progressing forwards in time, many of us have our own slowly failing gadgets; what is this thing, "the future," that we lost? In what sense do these proposals bring it back? And does a future that's been *resuscitated*, dragged out of the past and into the present, have any real claim to futurity?

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Full automation and a universal basic income are not things that belong only to some speculative science-fiction imaginary. Since the days of the postwar boom, and up until it met the grinding shabbiness of the crises of the 1970s, workers and intellectuals have fairly confidently predicted that in a short period of time human labour would be made superfluous by technological advances. (John Maynard Keynes, hardly a social revolutionary, was a major proponent of this idea.) The universal basic income has similarly long roots. After all, the idea has been toyed with several times within a capitalist society, even in the US state of Alaska. Richard Nixon, another unlikely hero for the left, proposed a Family Assistance Plan not entirely dissimilar to current UBI, which only narrowly failed to pass Congress. Neither Keynes nor Nixon had much interest in getting rid of capitalism. The future Snricek and Williams propose isn't really all that heterogeneous to the awful present we're inhabiting now, or its awful recent past. Something very important is missing.

To their credit, the authors are careful to remind us that they are not presenting a total vision but a set of actually achievable demands that could set us on the road to a better world. These are transitional demands, but once they're achieved we'll be out of capitalism and into something else. On this point I disagree. (That said, there are some – such as David Graeber and McKenzie Wark – who argue that we're already out of capitalism, and into something worse.) The book consistently refers to its future not as communism, but "postcapitalism." It's a world without work, but also without the commons. "The theory of the Communists," write Marx and Engels, "may be summed up in the single sentence: Abolition of private property." But here, private property remains untouched. The productive apparatuses are to be fully automated, removing workers as much as possible from every stage of the production process: who, then, will own them? Who will own the commodities that these apparatuses produce? And if humanity is unburdened from the need to work and left to produce freely in the pursuit of its own self-expression, who will own *that*? Without anything to oppose bourgeois property, the result could be fully monstrous: a bloated, gluttonous ruling class engaged in limitless production, and recapturing any losses when the new peons come to spend their universal basic pittance. The propertied classes would fuse with an automaton that requires no human parts except for ownership to form a single apparatus; Utopia as a cyborg dictatorship.

This future has, in fact, already been described – it's E.M. Forster's 1909 science-fiction story *The Machine Stops*. Here, all of humanity lives in tiny cells within the body of the vast subterranean Machine. The Machine produces all their consumer goods, it provides them with anything they might want or need at a moment's notice, it speaks to them, and allows them to speak to each other through video-messaging. People tend not to leave their cells; it's not forbidden, but it's certainly not encouraged. Full automation. Universal basic income. A networked society. In the end the Machine starts to slowly disintegrate. Billions die, and Forster, who had something of a reactionary streak, can only see this as a good thing. Who owns the Machine? The Machine does.

The abolition of work is a worthwhile project – and, what might be more important, an effective slogan – but depending on other factors, it could have any number of consequences. As Snricek and Williams point out, the automation of production under neoliberalism is not liberatory but merely disposessive; without the guaranteed basic income it becomes a plague rather than a cure. But the compensatory effects of UBI might not be as great as they imagine, and the proposals in *Inventing the Future* are not themselves intended to amount to communism. Its authors might argue that they only place the working classes in a better position from which to dismantle the existing state of things. I'm not so sure. While the workplace was never the only place where workers have historically struggled, it has always been an important site of radical agitation – it is here that the working classes exercise tremendous power and great capacity to disrupt production. While recent struggles have demonstrated the disruptive potentials of blockades, I'm skeptical that the disappearance of longshoremen or warehouse workers will necessarily advance our position. What forms could resistance take once the workplace is safely cleared on all human flesh, yet private property still remains firmly in the hands of the capitalists? One: nihilist terrorism. Two: protest marches, boycotts, and online activism. Or, in other words, folk politics.

The notion of "folk politics" is based on that of "folk psychology," a borrowed concept from the philosophy of mind, so I'll borrow one myself. Gilbert Ryle used the notion of a "category error" to help disentangle some of the confusion in the mind-brain problem: he gives the example of someone visiting Oxford, being shown around the colleges and libraries, and eventually turning to their host and asking, "but where is the University?" Similarly a neurologist will spend all day sticking his fingers in people's brains, and at the end of it ask, "but where is the mind?" And Snricek and Williams, trudging along with the rest of us in another fruitless anti-neoliberal street protest, ask: "where is the counter-hegemony?"

It's in their critique of folk politics that I have the most sympathy for Snricek and Williams' position. I've been on some of the same depressing marches, inevitably broken up by cops or (more likely) rain; I've seen the same witless prefigurative carnivals; I share the same exhaustion with the idea that if we all buy our milk from local sources the world will turn into a better place. They've touched on a very important point: the way the left does politics now is not working; we need to seek out a new organisational

strategy. Finding a strategy that works is an enormously challenging task, though, and *Inventing the Future* doesn't really attempt it. The folk-political dogmas of localism and horizontalism and their call for a new vision of the future do not belong to the same category; they've seen a deficiency in the means the left uses, and propose to correct it with a new set of aims. This is a category error – it's like saying that we're not walking quickly enough, so we should decide on a different destination.

For all its faults, folk politics does actually give people an idea of what they can personally do to help; it has a program for the arrangement of bodies: you join the demonstration, you buy local, you express your undiminishing outrage on Twitter. The old party model was similar: you organize your workplace, you go on strike, you vote Communist. Srnicek and Williams say: you create a counter-hegemony. How? When it comes to actual, tactical suggestions, their contribution is slight. They suggest, for instance, that we should attempt to capture sections of the media to promote our message. Which comes off a little condescending, as if people weren't already trying to do precisely that. We should also be building think tanks, establishing a "Mont Pelerin of the left." We should imitate Syriza and Podemos. The book may have been written before the former's total capitulation to neoliberalism last year, and it would be unfair to criticize the authors for not anticipating it. But as the example of Greece shows, our troubles go deeper than an over-reliance on placards.

The call for a "Mont Pelerin of the left," already familiar to those of us with an unhealthy exposure to social-ish wonks, might be the most troubling: a hyper-Gramscianism that treats all ideas as fundamentally equal quantities, capable of being transmitted through the same indifferent channels. The authors anticipate the argument that neoliberal institutions such as the Mont Pelerin Society could be so effective because their ideas were amenable to the ruling classes, and respond by noting that between its foundation in 1947 and the first implementations of neoliberalism in the 1970s there was a long period in which their program was seen as entirely nonsensical. This is less than convincing. The ruling classes have also always been presented with a diversity of strategic forms, and it's historical circumstances, which are not always entirely within their control, that make one or the other more feasible. But their power to choose is greater than ours – one can't legislate communism by an act of Parliament, or decree it in a Papal bull; it's unlikely we could build it with think-tanks either.

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Still, the real problem with *Inventing the Future* is not the deficiencies in its program – any bugs in the proposals could always be ironed out in the testing stage – but its relation to futurity as such. It's strange that a book titled *Inventing the Future* doesn't really contain any attempt to actually think through the *concept* of the future, rather than just its configuration. Its vision is conditioned by the assumption that what we're urgently in need of is a future, and that we all agree on what a "future" actually means. This is not, I think, the case. Hence the occasional contradictions: will our future emerge out of our present, through sheer force of mind, or do we dredge it up from the recent past? How *does* one invent the future?

One major machine in which the future is produced is of course culture – which Srnicek and Williams give remarkably little attention, despite their call for a new cultural counter-hegemony. Not every Marxist work needs to pepper its pages with the constant playful readings of pop-cultural texts so beloved of Slavoj Žižek *et al.*, but there's something eerily discomfiting about reading page after page on how there was once a future – from the Soviet conquest of space to afro-futurism to feminist cyborg theory – without a word on what any of this actually *looked* like. There's not even the obligatory *Star Trek* reference. Over two hundred and fifty pages, we're given precisely one diverting anecdote, about a near-riot in 1924 occasioned by rumors of a rocket voyage to the moon, and even that's skipped over as briefly as possible, as if it were somehow shameful.

This exclusion of literature is in some sense a mask. *Inventing the Future* is a fictional text disguised as a political manifesto. It describes a state of affairs that does not exist, and invites us to imagine. This is why literature is so essential to the political imagination: both are steeped in the unreal, but it's an unreality that makes claims on our actual existences. And, like the literary fiction of which it is a part, this sense of the future has not always existed. It's possible that Srnicek and Williams give such short thrift to culture because any cultural examination of the future reveals how fragile and temporary a notion it was. The future has already been invented, and it exhausted itself some time ago. But if we really want to think about why the future ended, it would make sense to look at how it began.

It's hard to find a precise date, but chances are that the future was first invented some time between 1627 and 1770. This indeterminate era, in which ordinary time ended and something very different took over, is nicely bracketed by two important books. In 1627, Francis Bacon published his *New Atlantis*, a vision of a Utopian society hidden somewhere in the Pacific Ocean. In 1770, Louis-Sébastien Mercier published *L'An 2440* (translated into English, confusingly, as *Memoirs of the Year 2500*), a vision of a Utopian society hidden somewhere in the twenty-fifth century. Somewhere, space turned into time.

Bacon's text was part of a great tradition of Utopian literature, hewing closely to the original meaning of the word: a *topos* designates a *place*. (Even if the negative prefix 'ou-' indicates that this place isn't really a place at all.) Campanella's *City of the Sun* is set in 'a large plane, immediately under the equator'; Moore's *Utopia* is hidden somewhere on the route from Europe through the Americas to Ceylon. A 12th century Irish poem describes the land of Cokaygne, "far in the sea to the west of Spain," where the houses are made of pies and nuns swim naked in rivers of milk. This geographical displacement isn't just a literary device: these ideal places are represented as being fully ideal, and while Bacon would certainly have liked his own society to look a little more like the fantasy he described, it's neither a prediction nor a regulative model. The inhabitants of his New Atlantis live under an enlightened government with just laws and wise customs, but it's not clear that this is what makes their society so harmonious;

because this is a piece of fantasy, they're also all personally virtuous. His Bensalemites are chaste and virtuous, and these qualities grant them the favor of God Himself, who sends them the Christian gospel on a miraculous pillar of light, despite their being separated by an ocean and a continent from goings-on in the Eastern backwaters of the Roman Empire.

Mercier's is radically different. Something very important has changed: he doesn't have opulent cities in the undiscovered tropics, but one perfectly ordinary France. His story is the dream of a contemporary Frenchman who falls asleep and finds himself transported into the far future, a world in which all the injustices of his time have been righted – not through the imagination or through divine providence, but political and scientific change. Religion has been thoroughly disestablished from the State, and what remains is decidedly Unitarian: the temple of the future has no paintings or images, being decorated only by the name of God in different languages. Worshipers pray in silence, and the priesthood claims no greater knowledge of the divine than the laity. The king, meanwhile, is a harmless tinkerer, freed from the duties of government, whose main social role is to come up with new scientific inventions. Suddenly, instead of a lateral distribution of variously perfected societies in space, we have a vertical, sequential evolution of society's perfectibility over time: the answer to our problems isn't here, but it's on its way. And Mercier, who went on to serve in the National Convention as a liberal revolutionary, would try to speed its arrival.

As the political force that has everywhere tried to institute change, for a long time this future belonged to the left. Early utopian socialists would busy themselves designing new machines for making ladies' hats, to be used in the rational society of the future. But it was the Soviet Union that most strongly pulled the as yet unborn into reality. (Recall Lincoln Steffens' report on visiting the fledgling USSR: "I have seen the future, and it works.") Almost as soon as it was born, the Soviet Union promised to do away with the antagonism between man and nature, man and woman, man and God. Look at their Christmas cards: while the Santa of the capitalist bloc trudged about on a flimsy reindeer-powered cart, the Soviet Santa zipped through space, occasionally waving to cheerful cosmonauts through the rocket's portholes. Throughout this period, capitalism still had its own visions of what might come – chiefly, dystopia, which is always faintly reactionary; the future formulated as a threat. "You think you have it bad now?" dystopia warns us. "Just look at what might happen later." There's a certain capitalist hostility to Utopianism – any new social formation might have the power to interrupt its global dominance – that's most clearly expressed in blockbuster films: the one who tries to radically change the world, the one with plans and schemes, is always the villain; our heroes just want to keep things the way they are.

But at the same time there's a strain of leftist thought that's also deeply suspicious of all this temporal mishmashing. It goes back to Marx and Engels: in *Socialism, Utopian and Scientific*, Engels pokes fun at the pretensions of the masterplanners. "Compared with the splendid promises of the philosophers," he writes, "the social and political institutions born of the 'triumph of reason' were bitterly disappointing caricatures." The Marxist critique of the future came most strongly from the philosophers of the Frankfurt School, in particular from Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer. Witnessing the mechanized horrors of the Third Reich, they came to see the notion of progress as an insidious lie. For Adorno and Horkheimer, enlightenment never rids itself of barbarism; for Benjamin, we must place a "taboo on the future." Besides, there's something philosophically as well as politically unsound about this future: the grand social future requires a transhistorical subject, a gaze of reason that looks out from beyond time, like the four-dimensional Tralfamadorians in Kurt Vonnegut. For all its pretensions to rationality, there's something about the progressive future that remains metaphysical, mystical, even shamanic.

Why did human aspiration come to be so closely connected with this slightly spooky process? It might be possible to sketch out a materialist critique. In the years between Bacon and Mercier, the transition of Utopia from spatial to temporal displacement accompanied the transformation of an economy based on primitive accumulation into one based on capitalism proper. By 1770, surpluses gained from spatial expansion were beginning to be replaced by surpluses that come out of labor, which adds value over time. Today, with the fictionalization of much of the economy, profits are made from the commitment to repay a debt at a future point, with those commitments themselves bought and sold as tiny tokens of the future. The future has burst through into a dizzied and decontemporised now. It exists within the present as a saleable commodity the paradoxical promise is always for tomorrow to happen today. As Derrida writes, "our time is perhaps the time in which it is no longer so easy for us to say 'our time.'"

But the future has always been several: how could it be otherwise, when it hasn't happened yet? The millennial or apocalyptic future, the future that abolishes time itself, is not the same as the prophetic future of a possible or desired outcome, which is not the same as speculative future of science fiction, which is not the same as the future envisaged by a calendar or a to-do list, which is not the same as the future of the high-yield bond, which is not the same as the future which will involve you reading the next sentence, or deciding not to. But what all these have in common with the phenomenological future – the one involved in the direct sensation of time passing, the thing that draws further out of reach the closer you get to it – is their slipperiness. Futures can never be touched or experienced, only imagined; this is why they're as diverse as the human psyche, and why they tend to be so dreamlike: at turns ludic, libidinal, or monstrous.

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I don't think that I'm castigating the book for being about its own subject-matter rather than something that I'd prefer. Rather, I'm afraid Srnicek and Williams have not thoroughly interrogated their own terms. In an excellent interview with Novara Media's Aaron Bastani – in which the authors do a significantly better job of outlining their ideas than they do in the book itself – they explain that *Inventing the Future* is intended to be a counterblast to what they regard as a dominant leftist strain of Frankfurt

School-inflected pessimism, but their book makes no attempt to defend their understanding of the future from any other.

We're told from the start that the left has ceded the future to the right, that the right imagines new social forms while we're trying only to slow the advance – as if the future is itself a *terrain*, a neutral substrate in which everything is set, rather than something which is continually produced by a present that is in turn transformed: in other words, something that's been invented. If the left has lost its capacity to produce futures, what's happened? What exactly, did we lose? For Snicek and Williams, the future as such is strangely homogeneous and immutable; the concept never changed, we've just been led astray by poor organisational tactics. The failure of the party-state model led to the rise of folk politics, but if we could drop our placards and reach out a little further, we'd finally be able to grab hold of tomorrow. If we're serious about interrogating what happened to the left, this isn't an answer; it's a strategic retreat from the question.

The problem isn't the placard, it's the iPad. *Inventing the Future* is a serious and no doubt well-intentioned attempt to think thoroughly about the kind of future we might want, and it fails because the iPad *is* the future, because the future is something that's already happened. Part of the book's difficulties comes from its over-eagerness to accept the ego-ideal of neoliberalism, to accept it as a genuinely transformative and future-oriented movement, rather than recognize it for what it is: a tactic for accumulation, haphazardly implemented, with no real goal beyond its own entrenchment. The particular mode and configuration of the future Snicek and Williams describe was a temporary phenomenon, lasting two-and-something centuries, and its embrace by the left was never nearly as total or enthusiastic as they suggest. It's over now: we're all Robert Laing, crouching in the ruins of our washing machines; we're in something else. The real challenge for the left, if we're to start winning again, is to find out what that something else might be.

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